

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Alarm Bells at Rogue Machine

Sylvie · Wednesday, January 29th, 2020

This is complicated, folks. Bear with me.

Rogue Machine Theatre in its recently new Venice home at the Electric Lodge has two plays running in repertory that may be accused of being really rogue. One, recently extended and enigmatically titled *Disposable Necessities*, is an improbable comedy that is not talking about your next trip to the supermarket (although, in a way, it is). The other, called *Earthquakes In London*, a city not known for its earthquakes, is a very, very, very ambitious bit of an important mess.

Both plays tackle rare and unusual subjects. Leave it to the exceptional John Perrin Flynn, the Rogue's fearless founding artistic director, to take them on — the massive *Earthquakes* because it sounds a *cri de cœur*, end-of-days alarm about our climate change crisis, and *Necessities* because it is so darned imaginative and well written as it trumpets a sci-fi range of options for life ever after, while also questioning the value of such a possibility.

Given that we live in a cataclysmic time when nothing, good or bad, seems impossible, we can take both attempts at expanding our horizons quite seriously. It's only the entertainment part of it that's variable, not the subject matter.

Directed by Guillermo Cienfuegos and written by Neil McGowan, a resident playwright at Rogue Machine, *Disposable Necessities* — the lighter of the two productions — is a smartly compelling evocation of what life might be like if we had the choice of buying a new persona and body (call it a “module” and be hip) when the body you were born in zonks out due to age, illness or accident.

Instead of selecting a coffin, just choose a new you.



I-r, Darrett Sanders & Jefferson Reid in *Disposable Necessities* at The Rogue Machine Theatre.

Intriguing? Cienfuegos' staging is confidently sure-footed as he handles the show's iconoclastic outcomes, aided by a company of five swift actors clearly having a ball. They and the play will delight you. Every note struck is the right one. The setting by David Mauer is kept simple, Christopher Moscatiello's sound is strong and clear, Christine Cover Ferro's costumes fit the occasion beautifully. Plot...?

You won't hear much more about the plot here, because it would damage the fun. Yes, *fun*. Hint: Things are made more complex because another choice in that recovered life — assuming you

choose to recover your life in the first place — also allows for a change of gender. That should send your mind reeling, but I can guarantee that no matter how much it reels, it won't come close to divining the play's final moments. So don't walk out early on the show. I doubt you'd want to anyway.



Billy Flynn & Claire Blackwelder in *Disposable Necessities* at The Rogue Machine Theatre.

This appreciation for the entertainment value of *Disposable Necessities* only sets off the struggle confronted by the Rogue's production of British playwright Mike Bartlett's *Earthquakes In London*. (The prolific Bartlett is also author of *King Charles III*, a work that presciently echoes the current rifts in the British royal family; it premiered in London in 2014, was filmed for BBC TV and staged at our Pasadena Playhouse.)

Bartlett is no one to sneeze at, but *Earthquakes in London*, which dates back to 2010, is a monumental opus about a monumental issue: the planet's climate change crisis as experienced as far into the future as 2525. As the action careens noisily and all over the place, we try to follow the misadventures of a dysfunctional family consisting of a taciturn widowed scientist and derelict dad and his three spirited grown daughters.

One can admire the play's ambition and appreciate Rogue Machine's desire to attempt mounting it, but the sheer structure and size of Bartlett's creation is overwhelming. It might fare better in a larger venue, with a budget to match, and some American adjustments. As it stands, 35 big and small roles are enthusiastically embraced by an energetic cast of 17 actors with differing levels of experience, each actor also trying for an English accent with spotty results.

Bartlett's intentional chaos is both the point and the production's major hurdle. It mandates the audience to simultaneously focus on more than one thing at a time — sometimes as many as three plus crowds — and given the width of the Electric Lodge's stage, shifting one's attention from one to the other in a confusion of activity ends up being more frustrating than symbolic. The multiple relationships combined with the unwieldiness of the effort make it hard to follow. Too bad, because there are some gems in the writing.

Earthquakes' lengthy first part is especially arduous to navigate, which also is a loss, because the shorter second part is clearer and more compelling. It helps clarify the story line.

Significantly, Flynn, who produced and co-directed the piece with Pepperdine University associate professor of theatre Hollace Starr, is intently aware of the primal significance of the play — a doomsday scream about an issue whose vastness adds to the difficulty of capturing its urgency. If not impossible, it is extremely difficult to attack all of its ramifications in a single play.

(In terms of scope and significance, *Earthquakes* is wanting to do for climate change what Tony Kushner's *Angels In America* did for the AIDS epidemic, except that *Angels* was a long two-parter and Bartlett is squeezing a similar amount of material into one sprawling and less coherent piece.)



Ron Bottitta, center, in *Earthquakes In London* at The Rogue Machine Theatre.

The excellent Ron Bottitta stands out as the father and scientist, Robert, who is living a lifetime's worth of regret contemplating what he might have done, what he did not do, what might have

helped and what was willfully ignored.

Flynn is explicit about the link he sees between *Earthquakes* and *Necessities*. Each looks at a radical yet drastically different change in this imagined future of humankind, which has already begun.

Theatrically speaking, each play also demonstrates the importance of delivery systems. The frontal doomsday scream of *Earthquakes* wants to jar us into action while the gentler, more pinpointed exploration of our arrogant human folly in *Necessities* leads us to reflect.

Perhaps more deeply.

Top image: Left, Ava Bogle as the pregnant Freyda in a roomful of mothers and babies in the Rogue Machine Theatre production of Earthquakes In London.

All photos by John Perrin Flynn

WHAT: *Disposable Necessities*

WHEN: Saturday, 5pm; Sunday, 7pm; Monday 8pm, through Feb 3. It has been extended Saturdays, 4pm & Sundays, 7pm (no Mondays) through Feb. 23.

RUNNING TIME: One hour, 50 minutes. One intermission.

WHAT: *Earthquakes in London*

WHEN: Fridays & Saturdays 8pm; Sundays, 2pm. Ends March 1. NO performance Feb. 21.

RUNNING TIME: Two hours, 45 minutes. One intermission.

WHERE: Rogue Machine Theatre (at the Electric Lodge), 1416 Electric Ave. Venice CA 90291.

HOW: Tickets, \$40, students \$25, available at **855-585-5185** or online, www.roguemachinetheatre.com

PARKING: Street or limited valet onsite.

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